

Sustainable foods and good nutrition – a new union

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From the nutritional viewpoint, Australians need to eat less of almost everything except vegetables and, possibly, seafood. However, telling people to eat less for the sake of their health is difficult. It may seem punitive to the individual, or may be dismissed because the health problems may not be apparent for many years and it unleashes the lobbying efforts of those whose profits depend on us consuming more. We can already hear cries that any suggestion to cut consumption will “cost jobs”.

If you think it's difficult to get people to change their food habits, you're wrong. Over the last 30-40 years, Australians have made *huge* changes in what they eat, where they eat and even how they eat.

Food habits do change – it's just that many of us are not very good at convincing people to make changes. Marketers excel at it and are paid handsomely for coming up with brilliant ideas. Someone who can encourage kids to pester their parents to purchase a product will earn around 10 times the salary of someone who looks after children. And advertisers are getting even better at exploiting basic human biological drives, desires and weaknesses.

It's much easier to sell indulgence and convenience than to sell health. And when we preach the gospel of nutrition, health or weight loss, we lose most of our audience. Young people are not impressed and older people find it easier to rely on medical interventions once problems develop. Health messages appeal to some, but not many. If health *were* a motivator, the majority of adults would not be either overweight or obese, and parents would not support and condone their children's poor eating habits.

Many healthier products also have the disadvantage of being unaffordable for those on low incomes, many of whom are in greatest need of a more nutritious diet.

When a food system results in the majority of adults being overweight or obese, we should accept that the system is broken. This broken system is costly – both to the individuals concerned and to state and federal government budgets who are obliged to pay the medical costs. These threaten to overwhelm health budgets within the next 10 years.

Any food system dependent on consumption-based growth is doomed to produce the situation we have today. Grow more, sell more, waste more – and waist more. In the current issue of the *Lancet* (Aug 27, 2011), Boyd Swinburn stresses that solutions to reduce obesity and to improve health and development cannot be based on the existing framework of consumption-driven growth, where prosperity is defined only in monetary terms, because this is the system that helped create the difficulties in the first place.

So how do we fix our broken system?

Many of us have tried to fix things. We've studied the problems and documented the disasters. We've encouraged food companies to change the types of fats they use and to tweak their products so they have less salt or sugar or fat. We've lobbied governments to alter food labelling to make it easier for shoppers to make healthier choices. We've tried to stop

children being targeted by food advertisements. We've made attempts to educate the public about healthy eating.

Some of our efforts have been successful and we applaud food companies who have changed their frying fats and also those who are making small gradual reductions in the salt content of their products. Sadly, however, there are just too many kilojoules in the modern food supply for any tweaking efforts in a few products to have much real effect.

Improvements are also difficult when so many seek to undermine healthier choices. A recent example came from information on retailing in the form of tips to 'sweeten salty snack sales', with advice to:

- place chips in high traffic locations;
- offer shoppers a range of salty snack options;
- ensure you have enough space for the fastest growing segments;
- increase basket size by putting drinks near salty snacks;
- use innovation to drive growth by ensuring prominence for the latest products being advertised.

Sometimes efforts also backfire, as can be seen with the introduction of healthier choices into fast food menus. Only 2.5% of orders are for these healthier products, but their introduction has been a marketing triumph, because it has increased sales of regular items. Chains have also introduced new, super-sized, super-*un*healthy items to 'balance' the healthy stuff. Healthy items draw a few previously reluctant patrons – but when they pass beneath the golden arches, the regular salty, fatty, high kilojoule fries, burgers and cheap meal deals win out.

Public health nutritionists' efforts also fail because of inadequate government support. Both major political parties in Australia are unwilling or afraid to act. One lot prefer to blame the individual for succumbing to the obesogenic environment; the others are too timid to introduce regulatory changes to labelling and advertising even when they are recommended by their expert commissioned reports. Government funding for preventive health programs is welcome and essential, but on their own, education programs are powerless against the marketing millions that sell a different story.

I don't suggest we stop our efforts. We can work together to reformulate some products to reduce salt, sugar and unhealthy fats, although I doubt the usefulness of encouraging a reduction from 1300 mg to 1200 mg of sodium for a cup of soup, when the real message would be to make your own soup with enough real ingredients so that added salt is unnecessary.

We should and will also continue the call to ban ads for junk food when children are watching television (which is mostly between 6 and 9pm). Many of us will also continue to push for labelling to make healthy choices the easy choices for busy shoppers who don't have time to scan barcodes or read nutrition information panels while juggling children and a trolley load of shopping. We will continue these campaigns because we have confidence that changing advertising rules and introducing easier labelling would be effective in reducing purchases of junk foods. Why are we confident? Because the food industry opposes these moves. Advertisers and marketers know what works.

Basically, however, I think it's time to also adopt some new perspectives. It's time to change the ingrained thinking that says it is 'normal' to buy, consume and waste so much because the planet can't stand the assault we are making. Here we join with the food industry, who are well aware that environmental factors must come into play.

So here are my proposals for change:

1. Change the language. Terms such as 'the general public' or 'citizens' or even 'people' have been replaced by the ubiquitous 'consumer'. We now 'consume' not only food and drinks, but we are 'consumers' of everything from cars, houses, holidays, transport, fuel for motor vehicles, clothing and other goods, washing machines and household equipment.

'Consumers' are passive beings, mere pawns for those who want to sell them stuff. The whole concept of 'consumers' is a major underlying driver that promotes overconsumption. If you make a choice as a citizen, it leads to a different evaluation of alternatives compared to making a choice as a consumer.

Whether it's overconsumption of food or fossil fuels or any other goods, the mindset that sees people as consumers plays a responsible role in increasing greenhouse gas emissions. Let's mind our language!

2. Find an effective way to re-think what is 'normal' for purchase, use and waste. Let's start with issues related to climate change and work on them to reduce consumption.

If foods carried a simple carbon footprint label and perhaps a commensurate tax, many nutritionally useless foods would assume a more sensible place as occasional treats in our diets. The carbon footprint may be a better motivator than the kilojoule count because it allows citizens to take action for the future health and benefit of the planet. Taxing foods according to their carbon costs could also be more useful and possibly more acceptable than taxing foods for their fat or sugar or salt. This would be a tax not on pleasure but for the general good of future generations.

Attention to the environmental effects of what we eat and drink – and what we waste – is already on the agenda in many parts of the world. Sweden's new dietary guidelines are based on environmental sustainability. Switzerland advocates integrating health promotion and sustainable development. The UK has environmental sustainability as a central pillar of its food strategy. In Australia, the Prime Minister's Science, Engineering and Innovation Council emphasises the links between feeding a growing population and maintaining environmental integrity. I believe it's time we all gave serious thought to such ideas.

Climate change means Australia's future food system will need to change. Our children and grandchildren need us to produce foods and drinks that require less input of energy and resources in their production, distribution, consumption and disposal of waste.

Waste might be the place to start. Waste impacts the wallet and is a major problem at all stages of the food chain.

With so much emphasis on the cost of living in Australia, now is a good time to publicise the current waste within our food system. A new frugality is appropriate, one that seeks to reduce food waste because it wastes resources (including water, energy, land and money) and also

adds to greenhouse gases as food is left in landfill. Reducing waste could appeal to citizens (as opposed to consumers) as a way to help preserve the local and global environment and reduce their own cost of living.

Some heartening evidence comes from programs run by Zero Waste. People in some areas have been placing all food waste into special bags that are collected and converted into compost for use by local farmers and gardeners. The trial has been amazingly successful with 99.7% of people correctly separating their waste. This far exceeds the success rates for container collection, even in South Australia where superior rates are achieved by legislation requiring container deposits. So how did they achieve this success? Zero Waste says it is because they sold the idea as something to protect and enhance the environment for our children and grandchildren. And they have shown that this has been a much more effective motivator than campaigns that have asked people to ‘do the right thing’ and place their rubbish into a bin.

Farmers are critically aware of the need to reduce waste. Food companies are also addressing waste related to energy and water usage and paying attention to the potential for recycling of packaging. The retail industry could use their power far more in this respect. Some supermarkets give valuable support to charities collecting food for the poor, but there are obviously better and more economical ways to help rather than generating and distributing leftovers.

Rejecting a food because it is the wrong shape, as occurs with up to a third of Australia’s banana crop is absurd and unnecessary. After last summer’s cyclones in Queensland, bananas of any size and shape were sold to willing buyers. Similar ‘standards’ apply to other crops, creating huge and absurd wastage. It would not be a difficult campaign to reduce such waste. ‘Best before’ dates also need more explanation to reduce waste.

At the household level, efforts to avoid waste have immediate benefits, especially for families feeling the pinch. Australians currently throw out 150kg of food/person/year, costing families a yearly total of between \$5.3 and \$6 billion. On a world scale, the food that is thrown out in wealthy countries could feed an extra 3 billion people.

Could messages about food waste, sold on the basis that it would save money and help the environment, reduce consumption? It’s worth finding out, and we could partner with local government and environmental scientists to do so.

3. Look for new food opportunities relevant to climate change

Climate change is not about to go away, however much some politicians may be pushing for that to happen. There is no doubt that from an environmental *or* economic perspective, the carbon footprint of what we consume will increase in importance. And addressing this problem may offer us a chance to change many aspects of our food culture.

Climate change offers many new jobs in agricultural research and in the production of a range of environmentally-appropriate plants and animals, many of which may be unfamiliar to many people. Julian Cribb outlines the possibilities and business opportunities in his book *The Coming Famine*. There are literally thousands of food plants unfamiliar to many Australians. Introducing some of them offers the food industry great opportunity to use its marketing powers to promote new ideas and new cuisines. Move over Master Chef!

So why are nutritionists becoming so interested in sustainability? As it happens, a diet based on principles of environmental sustainability dovetails nicely with what we recommend for good health. And recognising the true carbon costs of producing junk foods could decrease consumption.

As well as avoiding waste, such considerations will provide opportunities:

- to give more attention to soil health
- to develop sound methods for carbon footprint labelling
- to seek crops with less reliance on water, high energy input and phosphate fertilisers (useful to draw attention to agricultural research and favourable for those who market sustainable crops)
- to grow foods containing higher levels of particular nutrients (for example, more iodine in plant foods)
- to pay more attention to biodiversity and increase the range of plant and animal foods (a good thing for those growing plant foods and also potentially good for those from other countries and cultures who can access and provide expertise about foods that are familiar to them)
- to refine aquaculture, with more sustainable feed (a continuation and expansion of current Australian research)
- to promote foods in season (good for the planet, good for the tastebuds and may assist the public develop greater enthusiasm for fresh foods, as now occurs for products such as mangoes and stone fruit)
- to expand the range of meat, such as rabbit, quail, poultry, pork, goat, kangaroo (good for product innovation)
- to change production methods for beef, lamb and dairy products, with smarter farming and limiting production to areas where the animals do not need supplemental feeding and where their hoofs will not cause erosion and irreparable damage to native vegetation (good for sustainability)

There may well be job losses in some sections of the processed food industry. But there will be gains and opportunities in new areas. As well as agricultural research, production and promotion of new plant foods will need skills currently being used to sell junk foods. Assessment of carbon footprint methodology will create jobs, as will the tasks of reducing use of resources. These fields offer opportunities for skilled and clever jobs.

So can we sell a food system that emphasises

- buying only what we need (a bonus for the budget)
- enjoying fresh foods in season, and local where possible (extra flavour)
- more sustainable packaged foods (carbon footprint costs will assist)
- quenching thirst with water from the tap (good for sales of souvenir bottles)
- home-cooked rather than take away (good for flavour and families)
- new and interesting vegetables, fruits, nuts, seeds and grains (some can be grown in school & community kitchen gardens)
- sustainable fish farming
- and small portions of environmentally friendly dairy products and meat.

I think it's worth a try – for healthier bodies and a healthier environment. By buying, consuming and wasting less, choosing more locally-grown fresh foods with minimal packaging, choosing more plant-based foods supplemented with a smaller quantity of meat

from sustainable sources, and drinking tap water, we could simultaneously tackle two major problems: climate change *and* obesity.